

THE FIRST OPENLY GAY NSA EMPLOYEE October 30

NSA has had many pioneers over the years but one you may not have heard of is James Shoemaker, NSA's, and probably the US Intelligence Community's, first openly gay employee. For a long time being gay was considered a security risk within the Intelligence Community and employees could and would have their employment terminated for being homosexual. But that began to change one day in 1980 when James Shoemaker packed up his desk and was led away from his office by Security. It quickly became clear to him that NSA knew he was gay and that he would be fired like many before him. The odds were against him but Shoemaker decided to fight the action, ultimately leading to policy changes not only at NSA, but throughout the Intelligence Community.

James Shoemaker grew up in Kentucky and graduated from the University of Louisville, where he studied a variety of languages, including French, German, Spanish, and Russian. He wanted to pursue a career in language and linguistics, so his brother suggested that he look into NSA. In 1974, he was hired as a language analyst working high priority missions. In 1980, he was selected to take an NSA-sponsored training course at the Foreign Language Institute. While studying there, the students were encouraged to speak about their lives in the target language for practice. During these conversations, Shoemaker was open with his classmates about being gay.

Almost immediately after returning from language training, Shoemaker was removed from his office by Security. He was questioned about his sexual orientation and, although the investigators were very polite and professional, they asked very intrusive questions about sexual preferences and behavior. It became clear to him that they knew he was gay and that he would almost certainly be fired. His badge was taken, his clearance suspended, and he was sent to the FANX complex in an interim status to await a final determination about his employment.

At this point, Shoemaker decided to fight for his job. He knew that he was a very good language analyst working an important mission and that his sexual

orientation had nothing to do with his work performance. He called Frank Kameny, a well-known D.C.-based advocate for gay and lesbian civil rights, to help fight his case. Kameny had been fired from a position at the Defense Mapping Agency in the early 1960s for being gay. He had fought the decision and lost, but made it his life's work to help others in a similar situation.

Kameny advocated for Shoemaker to the senior levels of NSA leadership. In late 1980, Kameny and Shoemaker were called to a meeting on the 9th floor of the HQ building, which at the time was where the DIRNSA suite and Office of General Counsel (OGC) offices were located. Admiral Inman told Shoemaker that he could keep his job if signed an agreement to abide by certain conditions including telling his family, abiding by the laws of the jurisdiction where he lived concerning public conduct, and not getting involved in public activities which may compromise NSA's anonymity policy. Shoemaker and Kameny quickly agreed to the terms and Shoemaker returned to his job.

Shoemaker's story would later appear in several well-known publications including *The Washington Post* and *The Blade* newspapers, and the book *The Puzzle Palace* by James Bamford. While Shoemaker's name was not mentioned at that time for anonymity reasons, Frank Kameny's name was part of the story. Employees at other IC Agencies saw the Shoemaker case as a model for how to fight being fired for being gay, and contacted Kameny to help them fight their own cases, which he did. This landmark case was a first step toward ending discriminatory policies based on sexual orientation within the intelligence community. In August 1995, President Bill Clinton signed E.O. 12968, which prohibits using sexual orientation as a basis to deny security clearances.

Shoemaker went on to have a long, successful career at NSA as a language analyst and early pioneer of machine translation.

Around his retirement in 2005, Shoemaker talked about his career and why he decided to fight his firing in an oral history with the Center for Cryptologic History. He was asked why he would want to continue to work at the NSA when it wasn't welcoming for gay employees.

His reply, "That's an excellent question. Friends ask me that. And I said, "Well, I'm not working at just an agency. I'm pursuing my career – which is language and linguistics. There's no place in the world except perhaps the KGB which is better for a linguist." And so I said, "This is my career I'm talking about. Not just my job." I knew that if they fired me, that there would be an asterisk beside my name in every database in the intelligence community. I'd never be able to work for any other security clearance agency. And that only left very few places that I could work. I would have to get back into the university system, where I did work for three years as an instructor. Or something like that. I would have to basically go shopping around and it would be a very serious thing. So... So it was self-preservation. But also I said in my mind, "This is totally unfair. It is unjust. This has got to be stopped." I... I felt that I was a very good employee. In fact, the officials I talked to at the Agency all praised my record and said I was, you know, absolutely outstanding. That they didn't want to lose me. So I said, "Well, why are you going through this exercise?" I said, "There... There are something like 30,000 employees, locally, at NSA. That means about 3,000 people are gay – and among those, many are linguists." I just know anecdotally that a lot of linguists are gay. "So you're losing... You're going to be losing, you know, part of your best work force and it doesn't make sense." I... I argued with them about this. Told them I knew there were high officials in the Agency that were gay. And I knew that I had... I had a boss that was a gay. There were lots of fellow employees that I just knew were gay, even if they hadn't told me. They tried to tell me that I was the only one in the Agency, which is patently absurd. So I felt that I had to stand my ground to set a precedent. And I had it in my mind that I was not going to relent, no matter what. If I lost my job, I would still fight the decision through the community. I would elicit support from the community and continue to fight. So they were never... They were never going to win in my mind."